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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly reviews the current movement to downsize urban schools to help educators decide whether and why to pursue such a move, and to indicate which models appear most promising. Research evidence is strong that small schools benefit the entire school community. Small schools are particularly beneficial for disadvantaged youth, who profit from the extra attention and sense of belonging promoted in a small school. Putting several small schools into an existing large-school building can rejuvenate the building and enhance educational possibilities. The founding principles of small urban schools are: (1) cohesion; (2) autonomy; (3) focus or theme; and (4) a constituency assembled on the basis of shared interests. There are many difficulties in implementing small urban schools, but many more are being planned. They combine features currently being recommended by educational researchers as important in transforming schools. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION DIGEST

DOWNSIZING SCHOOLS IN BIG CITIES

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DOWNSIZING SCHOOLS IN BIG CITIES

Over the last 30 years research and experience have suggested that students benefit in many different ways from attending small schools, as opposed to large ones. Many existing schools, however, and even most under construction, can accommodate 2,000-4,000 students. While educators may disagree about the right school size, they recommend that the schools serve between 100 and 1,000 students.

This digest briefly reviews the current movement to downsize urban schools to help educators decide whether and why to pursue such a move, and to indicate which models appear most promising.

Rationale for Downsizing

The school downsizing movement is only a decade old, and still small, but the evidence is strong that small schools benefit the entire school community: teachers, students, and parents.

Student Benefits. Small schools are particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students. Specific benefits already documented for these and other youngsters include: better attendance and retention; better behavior, attitude, and engagement; enhanced academic performance; and increased involvement in extracurricular activities. The extra attention that students get from the staff affords them greater educational, psychoemotional, and social services, and also makes them feel part of a community. This sense of belonging, as well as academic performance, are further enhanced when students can choose their school, and make their selection based on the school's focus.

Teacher Benefits. Teachers, especially those who are able to choose their school, frequently experience the same growth in commitment to it as students do. The result is that they willingly participate in planning and analyzing practice, and they are likely to expend extra efforts to ensure that the students achieve and the school succeeds.

Institutional Benefits. Downsizing frequently improves school organization: more effective and appropriate governance, stronger student supports, improved staff effectiveness and satisfaction, better advisement, and enhanced curricula. The benefits to the school increase along with its autonomy and separation from other district schools, since there are fewer time- and energy-draining bureaucratic hurdles to overcome, and the ability to develop its own distinctiveness is empowering. Further, small schools are easier to "restructure" than large ones and reform strategies are easier to implement there, so models for successful change within them are emerging.

Finally, creating several small schools from a large, failing school is a solution to the problem of what to do with such a school, as well as an effective way to improve education without incurring construction costs, since the new schools are housed together in the old building.

Characteristics of Small Schools

Some small schools are quite different from large ones in all areas of operation, while others differ mainly in the fact that they serve fewer students. In addition, some schools are limited in their ability to fully implement the small school concept, because of their relationship to the school district and other schools within it, or decisions and regulations imposed by the administrators of the building where they are located.

Physical Location

Some small schools operate in a structure totally their own, but most exist within a building that houses other schools. In the latter circumstances, the small school either may be one of several small schools that combine to fill the building, all with equal decision-making authority over building-wide issues; or it may be the only such school in a building otherwise housing a single larger, "host" school that makes all building-wide decisions and may exercise some controls over the small school as well.

Some schools identified as small schools are really just special programs within a "parent" school, usually developed for a special student population such as limited English speakers. Most aspects of their operation are controlled by the host school administration, and the teachers may have duties in both the parent and small schools. These schools are often less successful than the small schools that achieve the separateness and autonomy necessary to distinctiveness.

Small schools with a building of their own obviously have greater control over their operations and are not limited by having to share resources. Such facilities are, however, often harder to locate. Especially in urban areas, it may appear nearly impossible to find unused space unattached to an existing school.

Classification

Different cities and school districts design their small schools very differently, and to different purposes. Although labels differ, four broad types of small schools are distinguishable:

House Plans. In a house plan students and teachers may remain together for some or all coursework. A house can be organized on a one-year or multi-year basis. It is usually overlaid upon the department structure of the traditional middle or high school that hosts it, which restricts the amount of change the arrangement can create.

Mini-Schools. This arrangement has some of the properties of a house plan and is also dependent on its larger host school for its existence. But mini-schools almost always serve students over a several-year period, and they usually have their own instructional program, giving them more distinctiveness from one another than houses usually achieve.

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Schools-within-Schools. These are separate and autonomous units with their own personnel, budget, and program, authorized by the board of education or superintendent. They operate within a larger school, sharing resources and reporting to the school principal on matters of safety and building operation. Both students and teachers choose to affiliate with such a school.

Small Schools or ***Schools-within-a-Building***. These have the properties of a school-within-a-school, but differ in that each is an entirely new, separate, and independent school—as opposed to one carved from an existing larger school. They have their own organization, instructional program, budget, and staff.

Founding Principles

Cohesion. Aside from their size, many small schools differ from larger ones in that their creation was based on a particular philosophy or a distinctive set of organizing principles.

Autonomy. To the extent possible, usually through permission or authorization from host schools or school districts, subschools and small schools develop their own organizational structure and climate. The four types represent a continuum with respect to autonomy and control over their own instructional programs, budget, and personnel.

Focus. Many small schools have an agreed-upon focus or theme. Some are created specifically to provide students with a specialized curriculum, such as a career magnet, or to provide a certain student population with a program tailored to its unique needs. A school's focus may also be its instructional approach. It can be either broadly defined, such as use of inquiry learning techniques; or based on specific strategies, such as cooperative learning. The usual function of the focus is to attract and sustain learner engagement across a full curriculum.

Constituency. A self-selected staff and student constituency results in a school community that is cohesive and committed to common goals. Ideally, therefore, small school teachers must volunteer to work in the school. Similarly, students benefit most when they elect to enroll, and when the student body is assembled on the basis of shared interests instead of on the basis of ability or achievement levels. Also, because they choose the school, presumably because of a special affinity for its program, parents tend to be more involved in its operation and in their children's performance there.

Future Prospects for Small Schools

Several major cities—New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, among them—have a significant investment in school downsizing, through strong professional and reformer support, and through financial support from private foundations and partnerships with non-profit organizations which are convinced that small schools are essential to urban education improvement. Downsizing experience to date has been mixed, although optimistic about its potential. It appears that, besides limited resources, the greatest inhibitors to a small school's ability to realize its potential is lack of autonomy—constraints imposed by stringent regulations, bureaucratic regularities, and longstanding labor agreements; and the need to mesh with policies and practices of the board of education, the school district, and the host school—and the hesitation of some education personnel at all levels to make fundamental changes in the way they function.

Despite the difficulties, small schools are opening and many more are being planned. They combine a number of the features currently recommended by both researchers and reformers in the interests of transforming schools into engaging and responsive places to teach and learn.

— Mary Anne Raywid

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